

A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered-Down

Thursday, October 15, 2020

To Be the Best You

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. —1 Thessalonians 4:11-12

A few weeks ago, the matter of envy and jealousy came up in the Sunday message, and since then my mind has been mulling this rich topic. Why is it that we are all so easily given to jealousy? From early on in life we are all inclined to striving and ambition. We want to be the best, but only one person can claim that title. In our youth there are three common arenas in which we contend to be great: athletics, music and academics. One need not travel too long down life's path before knowing how they rate in these fields, and I am continually amazed to learn how children are competing ever more vigorously at ever younger ages. Let it be said first that ambition is generally a good thing. The Scout promises to do his or her best. Paul wants us to have ambitions.

Ambition is a good thing, but it quickly leads us down some difficult roads and even into a few dead ends. Early in life we learn that there are the high achievers, and the rest of us. Some seem to excel at accumulating many of life's trophies while others, despite their best efforts, stand by and watch. And when a young one, perhaps of average abilities or a late bloomer, is disgruntled by life's contests they are often assaulted by those dreaded though well-meaning words from mom and dad: "Don't take it so hard. *We love you just the way you are.*" This attempt at encouragement feels more like the grand booby prize than a comfort. Envy and jealousy come easily and present us with some of our earliest spiritual battles.

As the years go by, as my career is more behind me than in front of me, and the kids are raised and gone, I find myself asking just who it is that is winning life's contest. As a pastor I am in the people business and have plenty of lives to watch. Part of my pastoral task is that of leading funerals when a person's life is remembered and the blessings they have contributed to this world are pondered. You people have taught me much, and these have been sweet lessons.

First, let us consider the big trophy wins. How do they rate in the long run? What of the class valedictorian, the record holder in high jump or the first chair in the orchestra? In the early years these are great and shiny badges of honor, to be worn with pride. Such accomplishment is deserving of praise and it is a delight to see hard work rewarded. I

think with pride of my parents and things they have done. My mother was a top swimmer for McCaskey High School, and in the years after graduation she entered numerous mid-Atlantic competitions. She accumulated quite a bucket of medals and trophies, and held a record for the mile swim in that league. Dad was a top electrician in his vocational class at McCaskey, and it was later said of him that he knew the electrical grid at Armstrong like few others. These are real accomplishments and they make me proud, but what do they really amount to in life's big contest? As we hear of these trophies, they gain our interest for a moment and we may delight to learn something interesting and inspiring, but they seem to rise to no higher status than a fun-fact. Some people accumulate numerous such fun-facts over their lifetimes, while others garner few. By the end of life's race these great accomplishments are often not as great as we first thought.

So, what are the big life trophies that are truly worth accumulating? My great delight is in watching people become the saints that God meant them to be, for this is the great achievement and trophy. What a joy to watch someone tackle their life's work with joy and energy, seeking to be their best and to better those around them. Is anything sweeter than observing a mother and father pour their love and affection into their family? What can be more exciting than seeing a person meet life's challenges as they come, responding with faith, energy and courage? How sweet it is to watch a person discern their own God given gifts and talents and then use them for the building and blessing of the Church? I continue to be richly blessed, not so much by the great achievers of the world, but by the humble and dedicated followers of Jesus who live their lives as a continuing discipleship.

It is really about following God's will and plan, and being the best person that you were meant to be. It is a thrill to watch Fred Smith be the kind of Fred Smith that God intended, with all the gifts and even the foibles which all seem to work for God's glory in the end. The scary part is that this sounds so much like mom and dad's unwelcomed words from earlier in life! "We love you for who you are and the person you were meant to be." And God's path to greatness is not quite so difficult to discern as we may think. The Scouts are onto it—do your best and serve others. None of this is said to pooh-pooh talents and trophies, and these special abilities can be put to plenty of good use along life's journey. Mom's athletic endurance translated into some commendable endurance in raising four kids, and Dad's planning and mechanical skills translated into many blessings in our home.

This is a season for reflecting on life. The colorful falling leaves remind us of life's beauty and brevity, and this bizarre year of quarantine and distancing has certainly caused us to take an extra look at life. In these musings, and as we consider our lives' shining trophies, or lack thereof, may we come to find delight in the truly great trophies

of the Kingdom. May we learn to focus upon the great goal of being the person Christ made us to be.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

O God, make us more thankful for what we have received, more content with what we have, and more mindful of other people in need: we ask it for his sake who lived in poverty, Jesus Christ our Lord. —Simon Baynes